DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 347 114 SO 022 302

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TITLE Is Geography Knowledge Useful in a Child's Education?
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Structures; *Cultural Awareness; *Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Geographic Concepts; *Geography; *Geography Instruction; Global Approach; Human Geography; Physical Geography; Social Studies

ABSTRACT

The usefulness of geography knowledge in a child's education is philosophically analyzed from two perspectives: (1) what geography knowledge should U.S. schools be teaching?; and (2) is there agreement about what types of geographical knowledge U.S. schools should teach? Only geographical knowledge that will be useful in life should be taught to children in school. A geographic education built around the five themes can teach children useful geographic knowledge. The themes are: (1) physical location; (2) physical and human characteristics of places; (3) relationships among people and with places; (4) patterns of movement over the earth of people, products, and information; and (5) the formation and change of regions on the earth. Philosophical analysis, supported by research, can explain why and how geographic knowledge is useful in a child's education in a democratic society. It is useful because it teaches children what in the world is where and why; it enables them to comprehend the earth and the environment; and it helps them appreciate the balance between human and physical factors that bind people to the planet. (KM)

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Is Geography Knowledge Useful in a Child's Education?

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Is Geography Knowledge Useful in a Child's Education?

Introduction

In recent years the level of many Americans geographical knowledge has been criticized sharply. Indeed, a 1988 Gallup survey conducted for the National Geographic Society showed that 75% of the adults surveyed could not locate the Persian Gulf and 45% could not find Central America on a world map. Furthermore, Bein (1990) administered a baseline geography test to over 3,000 Indiana college students and his findings mirrored similar low levels of geography knowledge.

Surveys like the 1988 Gallup and the Bein geographical knowledge survey administered to Indiana college students, draw needed attention to American's ignorance of geographical knowledge and spawns logical questions about the usefulness of geography knowledge in a child's education. This paper will explore the usefulness of geography knowledge in a child's education. Two fundamental questions concerning geography knowledge and its usefulness in a child's education will be examined.

First, what geography knowledge should American schools be teaching? Is there agreement about what

types of geographical knowledge American schools should teach? In a school curriculum awash in content, it is essential that only the most useful geography knowledge be incorporated into the school curriculum. Second, is geographical knowledge learned in school useful in life? Do children need knowledge of geography to help them understand world events, or to make them effective citizens? Is this kind of knowledge relevant and applicable in the daily lives of American citizens? This paper will philosophically analyze the answers to these questions, in order to explore the usefulness of geography knowledge in a child's education.

What Geography Knowledge Should be Taught in Schools?

Geography knowledge can be taught to children, in school, to accomplish a variety of objectives. The underlying philosophical objective which this paper is concerned, is that only geographical knowledge which will be useful in life should be taught to children in school. This section will explore theories of what geography knowledge has been deemed useful and therefore, should be included in a child's education.

Before examining geography knowledge more thoroughly, an excepted definition of the word should be established. Similar definitions of geography can

be derived from the Oxford English Dictionary and Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary. A consensus definition generally focuses on geography as a science that deals with the relationship between the earth and its life. More specifically, geography describes and explains the significance of location, distance, direction, and the distribution and interconnectedness of plant and animal life, including man and his industries.

Considering this definition, one might ask what geographical knowledge is deemed useful enough for children to learn? A number of geographers, including Grosvenor (Koerner, 1987) and Stoltman (1991) agree that knowing the locations of significant places and peoples is the first step towards geographic literacy. Therefore, it is arguable, that knowledge of the location and the overall significance of consequential places and the people who live there, is fundamentally important.

Similarly, Libbee (1988) believes that a child's education in geography should prepare them to understand why communities are located where they are, how people have shaped them into distinctive places, and how they have, in turn, affected peoples' lives.

More specifically, how do schools incorporate this knowledge into a child's geographic education? The authors reviewed are in agreement that the five fundamental themes developed by The Joint Committee on Geographic Education in 1984 contains the geographic knowledge which is most useful for children to learn. The authors agree that these five themes appear to be firmly established in most social studies textbooks and curriculums as the "new geography."

According to Hill (1989), the report, titled Guidelines for Geographic Education: Elementary and Secondary Schools, has become the bible, or framework, for teaching geography in schools today. In addition, Hill (1989) believes the themes are interrelated in order to form a structure that will allow children to incorporate geographic knowledge into their daily lives and their other school subjects.

The five fundamental themes of geography include: (1) physical location; (2) physical and human characteristics of places; (3) relationships among people and within places; (4) patterns of movement over the earth of people, products, and information; and (5) the formation and change of regions on the earth.

Stoltman (1991) explains that they are called

"themes" because each encompasses more than a single concept or idea. For instance, Hill (1989) states: "Location includes both absolute location (using a mathematical reference system, such as latitude and longitude), and relative location, as well as the idea that reasons for the locations of things can and should be identified" (p. 3). The consensus among the authorities reviewed is that these themes provide the big ideas and concepts that children can use to organize and interpret events using a geographical perspective.

Furthermore, Stoltman (1991) argues that there are few topics in the social sciences that do not fit comfortably within one of the fundamental themes. In order to better understand these themes and how each constitutes useful knowledge, they will be briefly described below.

The study of location deals with how people and places are positioned on the surface of the earth. As mentioned before, location can be either absolute or relative (Hill, 1989).

Lanegram (1989) describes place by the physical and human characteristics distinguishing one place from another. He maintains that geographic knowledge

teaches people where to place things like schools and recreation facilities properly.

The study of relationships within places looks at the interactions of humans with the environment. Stoltman (1991) asks the question: "How do people change the natural environment and how does the environment influence the activities of people?" (p. 1)

The study of movement shows relationships and patterns of people, places and information traveling between places (Hill, 1989). The Encyclopedia of Education (Deighton, 1971) discusses the tremendous impact that transportation and communication innovations have played in shrinking the world in the twentieth-century.

The Earth can be divided into regions to help people understand the similarities and differences of cultures and places (Stoltman, 1991). Moreover, it also considers the dynamics of regions, and how they were formed (Hill, 1989).

Robert Harper summarizes the relevance of the five fundamental themes in a child's education in his 1990 critique on the topic. He contends that when they are used together, they provide an understanding of human life as it varies over the earth.

A geographic education built around the five themes outlined above can teach children useful geography knowledge. To find out whether the five themes accomplish this, the question of useful geographical knowledge will now be examined in philosophical terms.

How is Geography Knowledge Useful?

One might ask how geographical knowledge is relevant to a child's purpose in life? Generally, the authors reviewed agree that geography knowledge is useful and vital to everyone, children and adults of all nations, and that it provides many useful applications within daily life. Certainly, not all geographical knowledge learned in school will be immediately useful in a child's life. However, this knowledge could prove extremely useful later in life.

The Oxford English Dictionary and Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary provide similar definitions to the word useful, as it applies to geography knowledge. In a consensus definition, useful geography knowledge is knowledge which is capable of being put to use; has practical utility; or is applicable to situations.

The president of the National Geographic Society, Gilbert M. Grosvenor, believes there is nothing more useful than geographic knowledge which provides an understanding of our earth and its people (Koerner, 1987). For example, Stoltman (1991) describes geography as a survival skill that provides people with the knowledge needed to locate suitable places to grow food, make clothing, and build shelter. He further explains how geography knowledge helps people use the land, and how air pollution at one location can affect another location a great distance away.

More specifically, four different ways of making geographical knowledge useful are identified and briefly outlined below. First, possibly the most obvious way to make knowledge useful is to use it directly in a vocation or profession. Geographical knowledge learned in school could be applied later in a career path which required geographical knowledge as a prerequisite. Geographers and travel consultants are good examples. In these fields, and many others, geographical knowledge is essential to the vocation and therefore, useful knowledge in a child's education.

In addition to the limited number of people in vocations which require geographical knowledge, this is

a kind of knowledge that can also be useful to the total population. The second way that geography knowledge can be useful is to assist in decision making and problem solving. The data from geographical knowledge is useful in making informed decisions.

Christopher Salter (Daniels, 1988), a consultant to the National Geographic Society and chairman of the geography department at the University of Missouri, summarized the view of many when he said, "Geography furnishes a framework for understanding the world" (p. 11). This framework can provide geographical information and other data that is needed in order to solve environmental, cultural, and spatial problems.

A number of scholars, including Hanna, Sabaroff, Davies, and Farrar (1966) argue that geographic knowledge is essential to some citizenship functions. For instance, does not every citizen in a democracy have an obligation to make informed geopolitical decisions? Brady (1989) maintains that knowledge of geography is an important tool for responsible citizenship and political understanding in our democratic society.

Additionally, Gritzner (1981) claims that geographic ignorance hinders the United States in

decision making at all levels of public governance, including our ability to function justly as a world power. A number of authors agree that our form of government depends on a geographically educated citizenry. However, our schools are not currently producing citizens with the useful geographical knowledge needed in a democracy.

Moreover, are American children who lack a geographic education about people and cultures which are different from their own more susceptible to xenophobia? Xenophobia is the fear or hatred of strangers, outsiders, or foreigners. Many geographers believe it is a possible consequence of geographic illiteracy. For instance, Cohen (1988) and Gritzner (1981) argue that ignorance of geographic concepts and skills promotes a narrow, intolerant view of others different from oneself. Thus, for some children, and even some adults, this could result in fear and possibly even hatred for unfamiliar cultures.

A third useful purpose for studying geographical knowledge is that it can produce valuable insights which interpret and clarify events. Many times, insights can not be easily explained by words, because, as Shermis (1992) points out, often they are

"kinesthetic, they are felt." (p. 51) Additionally, Grosvenor (Koerner, 1987) observes that he cannot imagine how children could grasp the meaning or impact of current events which involve people and cultures, environmental and natural disasters, or even everyday decisions dealing with location and place, without the insight of geographical knowledge.

Drawing upon "mental maps" children can make useful insights which explain otherwise uncorrelated information. Fromboluti (1990) points out that when children learn physical locations in school, they create mental maps of the world which they can use throughout life. These mental maps can serve not only to organize the people and events that children see and hear about in the news, but also to help them learn why certain events unfold in particular places.

Finally, the assertion that geography knowledge can foster international understanding and enhance global education is made by several authors. Many contend that geography knowledge can contribute more to a child's understanding of the world today then any other subject. Perhaps this can be accomplished best through the use of generalizations. Shermis (1992) contends that any knowledge that can be generalized

widely, is useful. Geography knowledge is useful in a child's education if its concepts can be generalized so that they are applicable in a variety of places and situations around the world.

Hunt and Metcalf (1968) contend that insights are forms of knowledge transfer that can lead one to make generalizations which are applicable in similar situations. Lanegran (1989) argues that children must learn how events in distant places can affect them, as well as, how their actions, and those of their country, can affect people living far away in other countries. This can be accomplished by generalizing geographical concepts and insights to fit similar problems throughout the world. This skill enables children to comprehend how they are connected to events happening elsewhere.

Much the same point is made by Robert Harper's (1990) statement:

> The United States is part of a global system where international economic, political, cultural, and environmental relations are fundamental. Every citizen needs to know the workings of that global system: how it functions, its assets and

> liabilities, and most important of all, the rationale by which it works. (p. 28)

By knowing this sort of information, one can make useful generalizations, within the global system, to help explain and predict similar situations in the future.

Is it useful in a child's education to understand how geography shapes peoples' attitudes, values, and patterns of living? London (1975) maintains that it is basic to human understanding. Much the same point is made by Kemball (1989) who contends that geographic knowledge develops children's appreciation and understanding of all people, and sometimes even sympathy for the lives and cultures of others, including minority groups in America.

Conclusions

Is geography knowledge useful in a child's education? Stoltman (1991) probably answered this question best, when he described geography knowledge as the key to understanding and acting effectively in todays world. Geographical knowledge is useful because it enables people to comprehend the earth and the environment, and to appreciate the balance between the human and physical factors which bind us to our planet.

The authors reviewed support the five fundamental themes of geographic knowledge described by the Joint Committee on Geographic Education in 1984. Philosophical analysis further indicates that these five themes contain useful knowledge which is relevant in a child's life.

This paper pointed out a number of ways that geographical knowledge is useful and, therefore, should be included in a child's education. Geography knowledge is useful in children's lives, because they can use the information in a vocation, for decision making and problem solving, to generate insights which explain events, and to make generalizations with geographic concepts which can be used in many situations. Indeed, the paper showed how a number of these areas are related.

Philosophical analysis was applied to the research in order to explore this topic completely. The analysis, supported by research, explained why and how geographic knowledge is useful in a child's education. The topics of citizenship education, global understanding, xenophobia, and current events in everyday life were drawn from the literature to assist in showing this relationship.

Geographical knowledge is useful, because it teaches children what in our world is where, and why. This is extremely important for the citizens of a democratic society. One responsibility these citizens are supposed to bear is to make informed decisions on important regional and even international issues. The quality of many of these decisions is dependent, in part, upon how much geographical knowledge they possess and use in solving many problems. Therefore, geographical knowledge has a useful place in a child's education in a democratic society.

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